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answers—and, just as Pammie does, *Who's Irish?* resists definition. Jen's stories embrace the marvelous and the wretched aspects of awakenings, defining choices made at pivotal times in fictional lives so finely realized that they seem in many ways to be our own.

—*Rachael Perry*, *Mid-American Review*

A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia and Other Stories by Victor Pelevin. Translated by Andrew Bromfield. New York: New Directions, 1998. 213 pages. \$23.05, cloth.

In the title story of Victor Pelevin's *A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia and Other Stories*, a young man, Sasha, is transformed into a werewolf after stumbling upon a group of strangers gathered in a forest clearing. They offer him a jar of elixir, the mysterious contents of which bring about his metamorphosis, and, later, following a midnight run to the village of Konkovo, he accepts a fellow werewolf's maxim, "that only werewolves are real people." The rest of us are simply dawdling, unsure of the "meaning of life."

Easily the most compelling of the nine stories, "A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia" explores the potential for growth and change in a harsh, stunted environment. Pelevin's description of the natural landscape early on evokes a "kingdom of evil," "the vegetation strange," "the flowers and grass" looking as if "grown under the threat of violence." Sasha, wandering lost through the woods, reflects the vapid landscape in his drooping, dejected lurch. As chimerical and fantastic as it is, the transformation he undergoes seems to be the only brand of change possible in such a gloomy haunt. At first, when Sasha joins the group, the mood is one of foreboding and danger. However, once he changes over, sprouts fur and claws, the narrative is charged with a feeling of optimism, something akin to animal ebullience. The landscape, as a result of Sasha's newfound "awareness," loses a good deal of its snarl, is made traversible, and in the story's final scene

comes to serve as a pad, a center for the werewolves' return: "And all together they were howling about the incomprehensible beauty of the world, the center of which lay in the grass of the clearing."

In "Vera Pavlovna's Ninth Dream," another story demonstrating Pelevin's artfully ironic use of setting, Vera, a third-degree solipsist and public men's room cleaning lady, is borne away on a fecal tide, a surrealized wave of stinking excrement. Unhappy with the drab interior of her men's room, Vera demands a change, wants to spruce up the tiles, enliven the stalls. Though she never makes an official request, her lavatory is modified nonetheless. Instead of simple hanging decorations, men arrive with record players, "green velvet curtains," and a uniform for her to wear. The bathroom is subsequently converted into a shop "selling goods on commission," a subterranean hotbed for black-market capitalism. All the while, she continues her periphrastic philosophical discussions with Manyasha, a fellow cleaning lady. Asserting her solipsism, taking credit for the grand changes in her bathroom, she states, "There really isn't a public lavatory, there isn't anything but a projection of inner content on to external object[s]." For this spout of selfishness, believing she alone has perpetuated her new working conditions, Vera is punished, tossed from her "throne" onto a building hill of dross and feces. Pelevin explodes Vera's site of complacency, skillfully harnessing the absurd and the outlandish to bring his protagonist closer to the realization "that all changes in history, when they happen, take place exactly like that: as though they are entirely natural."

Of course Vera is caught in the throes of a dream at the moment of her realization; the broader social perspective she gains then seems fleeting, even disposable. How much Vera learns from her punishment Pelevin does not make clear—only what she loses: her job, her family. The esoteric socialist humor in "Vera Pavlovna's Ninth Dream" and in stories like "Sleep" often points at political and cultural states of being in Russia as somewhat alien to American readers. Some of the jokes are, well, lost in translation. But what is kept from cross-cultural readers does not discourage Pelevin's ability to comment sagaciously on our larger human condition.

"Sleep," for example, tells the story of a burgeoning somnambulist, Nikita, who discovers the rewards of dozing. Though asleep, he's able to view and understand the world around him with an acuteness unfound in

waking life. He notices his classmates, the people on the subway, his parents—all asleep. When Nikita's mother sees that he has mastered the art of sleeping, she says, "It's like you've been reborn," and for a time he is satisfied with his new skill. But anxiety and curiosity creep in, and he yearns to know the contents of his comrades' dreams. Nikita feels increasingly disconnected, unable to successfully tease out another's dreams. His frustration seems reserved not only for the torpor and weariness of Russians, but for TV-watchers and vodka-drinkers everywhere—for those of us entranced by programs like "Our Garden," and "Traveler's Club," bogged down, encumbered by the weight of a late twentieth-century lassitude, an unshakable, soporific passivity.

Perhaps the most endearing story of the collection is "The Ontology of Childhood," a rumination on the practice of remembering youth. It departs from the Russo-centricities of "Vera Pavlovna's Ninth Dream," "Bulldozer Driver's Day," and "Tai Shou Chan USSR," approaching, through the use of second person, a collective childhood, one the narrator believes should be carefully preserved. The story reads like an essay, elegiac in its sensitivity to the particulars lost while growing up: the widening bunk bed, the morning sunshine, the "conquest of space," the "sound map of the world." With a dab of cynicism, Pelevin acknowledges the difficulty of adults revisiting the wonder and joyous bafflement of childhood. "We're usually too caught up in what is happening to us in the present to suddenly shift our perspective and start remembering." Even with barriers to remembrance, preservation is still possible, as is the attainment of happiness, happiness which "in general is nothing but reminiscence."

For Pelevin, whether it be werewolves or sleepwalkers, shadow-wraiths or cleaning ladies, fiction in general is nothing but attitude. Pelevin is a hungry writer who attacks his subject matter, yet always manages to control his barks and bites, rendering a world both threatening and magical, shifting morosely from the real to the fantastic, and never letting up, never tiring.

—David Amadio, *Mid-American Review*